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ABSTRACT

In fall 1992, the League for Innovation in the Community College conducted a survey of 1,042 community colleges to determine the extent and nature of their involvement in workforce training programs, the types of companies served, funding mechanisms, and perceived obstacles to providing effective training. Study findings, based on a 73.2% response rate, included the following: (1) of the 96% of respondents who indicated that they provided workforce training, almost all customized programs to meet the needs of local employers; (2) the majority of the workforce training programs operated on a modest scale; (3) the companies served were most likely to be small or medium-sized, with less than 500 employees; (4) 39.2% of the participating employers were involved in manufacturing; (5) job-specific technical training and computer-related training were the most commonly provided services; (6) training locations were evenly divided between on- and off-campus sites; (7) over 90% of the responding colleges coordinated workforce training programs under continuing education or community services divisions; (8) training programs were supported by employer-paid contracts, college funds, tuition, or state and federal resources; (9) 85% of the respondents perceived that they were meeting employer needs effectively; and (10) the most cited obstacles to effective training were inadequate training budgets, employer inability to afford training, difficulty in being recognized as training providers, and lack of experienced trainers. The survey results suggest that community colleges are providing effective workforce training, though on a limited scale; that resource constraints are the principle obstacle to expanding this scale; and that college and business leaders must work to spur private investment in community college training programs. (ECC)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE WORKFORCE TRAINING PROGRAMS: EXPANDING THE MISSION TO MEET CRITICAL NEEDS

Brenda Marshall Beckman and Don Doucette

Growing concern regarding the nation's competitive position in the global economy has been a matter of discussion for some time. It is now clear that a fundamental factor contributing to this critical situation is the chronic, long-term inadequacy of workforce preparation. Consequent issues of quality and productivity have forced corporations across the country to restructure their organizations and to invest in worker training.

Due to the positive anecdotal experience of many employers in using community colleges to provide such training, there has been a growing interest in these colleges as primary sources of education and training for business and industry. Costs have been reasonable; their experience in teaching adults has helped employees to learn effectively; and their willingness to design high-quality, need-specific training programs on relatively short lead times have made community colleges increasingly the providers of choice. What has not been known is the extent to which this has occurred nationwide.

In response to the need for more information about workforce training programs, the League for Innovation conducted a survey in the fall of 1992. Its purpose was to determine the extent and nature of community college workforce training programs, the types of companies they serve, funding mechanisms, and perceived obstacles to providing effective training.

Results of the Survey

The "Survey of Community College Training Programs for Employees of Business, Industry, Labor & Government" was sent to a list of all community college chief executive officers in the United States compiled from the fifty state directories of two-year colleges. The CEOs were instructed to pass the survey on to the individuals in their colleges responsible for workforce training to complete. Responses representing 763 of the 1,042 two-year colleges surveyed were returned, for a remarkable response rate of 73.2 percent. Responding colleges were highly representative of all community colleges in the United States. Nearly all were public institutions; over 80 percent were comprehensive community colleges and about half were single campus colleges located in rural communities.

Extent of Training Programs. Of the 96 percent of respondents who indicated that they provide workforce training for employees of business, industry, labor, and government, almost all customized programs to meet the needs of local employers. All reported providing workforce training, although the majority did so on a modest scale. Half trained fewer than 1,000 employees during the 1991-92 academic year; half provided training for fewer than 25 employers; and half generated less than $100,000 gross in training contracts. However, 10-15 percent of the respondents reported large programs training several thousands of employees in contracts worth over a million dollars.

Types of Training and Companies Served. Two-thirds of training provided was for employees from small and medium-sized companies—those with fewer than 500 employees. The largest percentage was for employers in manufacturing (39.2 percent), followed by those in government and education (12.9 percent), and health services industries (11.7 percent). Most commonly provided was job-specific technical training (20.2 percent), followed by computer-related training (18.6 percent), supervision and management (14.6 percent), and workplace literacy (9.8 percent). Fully 85 percent of training was delivered by traditional methodologies with few colleges employing instructional technologies. Approximately half the training was at off-campus facilities provided by employers and half on campus. Most instructors were external trainers hired on a contract-for-services basis.

Organization and Funding. Over 90 percent of responding colleges coordinated workforce training programs under continuing education or community services. Over 85 percent reported having had training units for at least three years, the substantial majority for more than five years. Training programs were supported by contracts paid by employers (35.5 percent), college operating funds (26.9 percent), tuition and fees (16.0 percent), and state and federal sources (15.5 percent). Almost 54 percent of gross training revenues were generated by formal contracts, and 46.1 percent were repeat business. Half the contracts were one to three months in duration, and the average value of two-thirds of the contracts was under $10,000.

Perceived Effectiveness and Obstacles. Nearly 85 percent of responding colleges perceived that they were effectively meeting the training needs of existing clients. Most commonly cited major obstacles to providing more

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effective training were inadequate training budgets (34.6 percent), the inability of employers to afford training (25.3 percent), difficulty in being recognized as training providers (22.8 percent), lack of experienced trainers (22.3 percent), and inadequate support for curriculum development and other costs (22.2 percent).

In summary, survey results show that nearly all community colleges have accepted workforce training as an extension of their longstanding career preparation, continuing education, and community service missions. However, the great majority of colleges reported operating only modest programs, citing lack of resources—among both the colleges and the companies with training needs— as the most common obstacle to providing more or more effective training.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While it is not surprising to find community colleges engaged in training employees of business, industry, labor, and government, it is eye-opening to find how pervasive this activity has become. Nearly all responding community colleges accept workforce training as a legitimate service for them to provide for local employers, and nearly all customize such training to meet employer needs.

Meeting Unmet Needs. Although two-thirds of training provided by community colleges is for the small and medium-sized businesses that make up 80 percent of all companies in the nation, surveys have documented that larger companies are much more likely to provide training for their employees. The limited amount of training provided to employees of small and medium-sized companies—the acknowledged engine of economic growth in the United States—has been identified by some economists as the single most critical problem to be faced in improving the competitiveness of the nation's business and industry.

This being so, perhaps the most important result of this survey is to document that community colleges are already providing effective workforce training, albeit on a limited scale, in this area of most critical need for the national economy. Not only are they addressing the needs of small and medium-sized companies, they also provide technical training for employees of manufacturing firms, another key need identified by the American Society for Training and Development.

Resource Constraints. A predictable survey finding was that those community colleges that provide only limited training programs cite resource constraints as the principal obstacle to meeting local workforce training needs. Given the current fiscal crunch, it is not surprising that community colleges are unable to devote major resources to what amounts to new program initiatives. Many college training directors, in fact, report requirements to recoup both direct and indirect costs of training provided. An interesting insight is that it is not only the community colleges that are constrained by lack of resources—small and medium-sized businesses are also perceived as unable to afford necessary training.

These results beg the question of whether community colleges represent an intact infrastructure that could provide critically needed workforce training if able to access sufficient means to do so. It appears that an infusion of resources would be necessary to expand current efforts to the point that they match outstanding training needs. Given that constraints on public resources are likely to increase, the most realistic prospect for accessing funding is through the private sector.

Need for Private Investment. Survey results hinted that some companies either do not appreciate the value of training to their long-term competitiveness, or simply balk at investment in training unless it can be shown to increase profits in the short term. It remains to be seen if college or business leaders with longer-term perspectives would respond favorably to programs that might leverage public investment with private funds to provide training to improve productivity and competitiveness and, in turn, underwrite training costs. The case needs to be made that economic returns justify increased investment in training.

Perhaps the most important result of the survey is to establish that community colleges represent an existing base resource with the capability—and, it appears, the inclination—to provide the workforce training most needed by the nation's economy. They already concentrate most of their efforts on small and medium-sized companies in technical areas—precisely the type of training that is currently the most neglected, and yet is, at the same time, the most needed to enhance the competitiveness of the nation's economy.

However, community colleges will not be able to fulfill their potential to meet training needs without the investment of more resources. This investment will not be made until business and industry leaders accept training as a cost of doing business, an investment that will be returned directly to the bottom line. This investment will not be made until state and federal officials recognize the potential for community colleges to deliver effective training and develop policies and funding mechanisms that encourage the utilization of this in-place infrastructure. This investment will not be made until community college faculty, staff, boards of trustees, and CEOs step up to the training mission as fundamental to their commitment to meet local needs and to serve the vital economic and educational interests of the nation.

Brenda Marshall Beckman is associate director of the League for Innovation in the Community College and coordinates projects related to business and industry training for the League, including its Community College Business and Industry Alliance and the Business and Industry Services Network. Don Doucette is also associate director of the League and is the principal investigator for the survey on which this abstract is based. A complete report of the survey results is available from the League office, (714) 367-2884.

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